

Standing Up for Our Communities: Why We Need a Police-Free Future

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By *Rachel Herzog, Truthout* | *Op-Ed*



(Image: Lauren Walker / Truthout; Adapted: **HarryHart**)

We are living in terrifying times. With each passing day, the Trump administration unleashes new waves of humiliation, degradation and repression. Many of us fear deportation, the evisceration of the social safety net, imprisonment or detention, ecological calamity, war and similar disasters. For those of us fighting against the violence of policing, the context was already grim. The predominance of suppression policing -- sometimes called "broken windows policing" -- with its mainstays of racial-profiling, sweeps, stop-and-search, ticketing and psychological and physical coercion and abuse, has made day-to-day contact with law enforcement dangerous. Add to these mundane policing practices the very real threat of dying at the hands of law enforcement agents, and the picture becomes even more bleak. Under the current White House, promises to intensify and expand an already vicious system are a signal of very dark days ahead. In a statement released during the first week in office, the Trump administration communicated its law-enforcement priorities. According to [this statement](#), "The Trump Administration, will be a law and order administration. President Trump will honor our men and women in uniform and will support their mission of protecting the public. The dangerous anti-police atmosphere in America is wrong. The Trump Administration will end it."

The Trump regime's authoritarian tendencies should give us pause. When we consider the ways in which law enforcement has historically been used by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent, we need to take seriously the state responses we're likely to encounter in reaction to an increasingly large and dynamic anti-Trump protest movement. Whether we are considering the expansion of policing practices -- including profiling, stop and frisk, sweeps and militarized tactical engagements -- or crackdowns on protest and dissent, we know that the surest way to reduce the violence of policing is to reduce contact with the police.

If ever there were a time to fight for the elimination of policing from our communities it is now. Recent weeks have demonstrated just how powerful we are when we come together to resist repression. This groundswell of fight-back should embolden us to build the world we want to live in today, even in the face of violence and fear mongering.

I believe that we have a better chance of living healthy, stable, secure lives if we eliminate policing. Sometimes abolitionists are accused of having unrealistic visions of a future free of the prison industrial complex -- big dreams that may be beautiful but are not practical, visions that are idealistic but too far away from the here and now. My abolitionist praxis looks toward a policing-free future *and* is rooted in actions toward that end in the here and now.

Here are some ideas about ways to begin building for the abolition of policing today. These are not meant to be a set of prescriptive action steps and time frames. They are not comprehensive. They are simply one set of potential practical steps in a universe of good ideas to help us think about what is possible. And even for people for whom a world without policing is impossible to imagine, it is possible to take practical steps toward an ever-shrinking reliance on and relationship to law enforcement. The most important thing is to begin to take some steps today and to keep practicing moving in that direction.

Today

Take stock of your context. How cognizant are you about the reach, impact, or omnipresence of law enforcement in your daily life? What are your own habits and inclinations in engaging with law enforcement policies, practices and agents? What is your consciousness of the presence of mechanical and human tools of surveillance and law enforcement?

Examine your own relationships to law enforcement. What role do you understand cops to play in the world around us? Do they provide you with a feeling of security and confidence that someone will back you up in an emergency or when you feel afraid? Do you fear their authority or worry about being humiliated, coerced, or hurt by them? Do you experience some combination of relief *and* worry? Would it feel like common sense to call the cops if the neighbors were being too loud? If you had things stolen? If someone did you physical harm? Would it feel against your common sense to call on law enforcement agents in any situation?

Assess your vulnerabilities (both perceived and experienced) and your available resources. Regardless of whether or not your common sense would lead you to engaging law enforcement, what kinds of situations could you envision in which you would feel at enough risk that you would seek help or intervention? What would you hope to achieve by seeking that kind of support? What resources do you already have at your disposal -- people, networks, organizations, educational materials, financial resources, etc. -- that you could employ toward those ends? What kind of preparation or cultivation would you need to do to make those resources accessible and applicable to the situations in which you feel vulnerable or need help or intervention? What else do you need to bring closer or cultivate that is not currently within your reach?

Tomorrow

Begin (or continue) thinking about how to reduce as much contact with law enforcement as possible in your daily life. Drawing from your assessment of potential vulnerabilities and available resources may help you consider what you could do other than call the cops when trouble arises.

Prepare for emergencies when not in crisis. Who could you call immediately in a crisis? Commit at least a couple of those numbers to memory. Where would you go? What would you need (medication, etc.)? Who is physically close to you who could be called upon? Is there a set of neighbors you could rely on? Friends and family close by? Map additional resources that you could employ not only in supporting your own needs but that you could also suggest to others seeking help.

Do research on the nearest places to seek shelter, on local crisis intervention teams, on resources for people in substance use or mental health crises. In addition to considering how to respond to emergencies, think through how might you also increase your capabilities to disengage from law enforcement when you're *not* in crisis.

Next Month

Don't try to go it alone. Build a team to call on. Get those people ready, share the information you have gathered, help them assess their own vulnerabilities and resources, and make clear commitments to each other. Read and study together a full range of non-law enforcement resources to engage should you need support or have an emergency. Document how you built your team so others can learn from it.

Research the trade-offs your city, county or state is making by prioritizing law enforcement responses. Are basic health and human services programs suffering? Are street harassment, stops and violence against people spending time in public space at high levels? Are fines and fees being issued at high levels? Is law enforcement being used to put a chill on community organizing or to intimidate community organizers? What kinds of campaigns and programs are providing meaningful de-escalation, community accountability or violence intervention responses? What efforts are at play to get cops out of schools or to reduce raids and sweeps, or to prevent people living outside from being harassed and displaced? What other kinds of efforts are going on in any of these areas? What organizations are working on these issues? What can you do to support shifts away from law enforcement intervention and toward practices and tools that make law enforcement more and more irrelevant?

Next Year

Get involved in organizing. Take steps to increasingly erode the power and reach of law enforcement. Push for measures that denaturalize and delegitimize the role that policing has in our lives. Intervene in the processes through which police budgets are decided to shift resources away from law enforcement and toward investments in life-affirming resources, programs and services, such as those you mapped wanting to be able to use.

Increasingly shrink the size of police forces. Push for cops to carry their own liability insurance, establishing a structured means by which they will incur financial penalties for doing harm. Demand that cops with histories of violence, killing and coercion be fired, ineligible for re-hire and ineligible for law enforcement jobs of any kind (including private security). Advocate for cops to be pushed out of schools,

libraries and community centers. Propose no-call policies and noncooperation practices where you work, play and live that standardize practices to reject law enforcement intervention. Reject false solutions, such as community policing or community control of the cops, which reinforce and expand policing in favor of promoting solutions that shrink police forces to obsolescence. While engaging in these incremental steps aimed at eroding the power, scope and scale of policing, be vigilant to avoid advocating for anything that would entrench or legitimate policing or create obstacles that would be necessary to tear down later to reach your goals.

Continue to build out your team to incorporate ever-widening circles and networks of people willing to support each other in addressing harm or in times of crisis without engaging law enforcement. Keep reading and studying together and share tools, practices and models you have developed. Help amplify the community resources you mapped to help increase local knowledge about the range of supportive resources available to disengage from law enforcement.

In Ten Years

Scale up organizing demands. Work through statewide, regional and national networks and coalitions to advance campaigns and projects that may have been happening more locally. Push beyond reductions in policing to elimination. What elements of law enforcement can be done away with entirely? Tip the balance of power toward community health and wellbeing. Help strengthen responses to harm that do not rely on law enforcement intervention, such as **community accountability** and **transformative justice** approaches, which help community members to prevent, intervene in, and repair harm using resources existing within their communities. Raise the profile of groups doing that work well. Promote the sustainability of community-based resources that increase people's abilities to prevent, interrupt and repair harm and respond to crisis without law enforcement or similar intervention.

The Future

It is possible to create a future free of policing. That future offers the possibility of reduced harm at the hands of the state, as well as investing in means of addressing harm that increase the potential for behavior to shift and harm to be repaired rather than pushed to the side. A future free of policing requires care and support in crisis rather than suppression, denigration and violence. It also requires reconceptualizing who "belongs" in our physical environments rather than monitoring, profiling, stop and search and leading with suspicion. Instead, it requires participation and investment in social networks from friends, coworkers, families and neighbors, expanding ever outward while taking the chance to intervene and support each other in times of harm or crisis rather than passing responsibility onto unspecified authority figures. It requires study and practice and experimentation and trying and failing and trying again. And it requires consistently taking concrete steps in the direction of our vision over and over again, in a process potentially spanning many years. Taking those steps over the long haul is possible when we believe it's possible to create a future free of policing.

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